Cogn-IQ Encyclopedia

Motivation Theory

Motivation theory is the family of frameworks explaining why people initiate, direct, and sustain goal-directed behaviour — from Maslow's needs to self-determination theory.

FIELD
Psychology of motivation

WHAT IT IS
Why people initiate, direct & sustain action

KEY SPLIT
Intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation

MAJOR THEORIES
Maslow · SDT · expectancy-value · attribution

WHY IT MATTERS
Drives achievement — and test-score validity

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ABSTRACT

Motivation theory is the family of psychological frameworks that explain motivation — the processes that initiate, direct, and sustain goal-directed behaviour. There is no single theory but a set of complementary ones, unified by the basic distinction between intrinsic motivation (acting for the activity's own sake) and extrinsic motivation (acting for a separable outcome such as a grade or reward). Early theories asked what energises behaviour: drive-reduction, which held that needs create tension that behaviour reduces, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, both influential but empirically limited. Modern theories capture distinct mechanisms: self-determination theory, in which intrinsic motivation flourishes when autonomy,

competence, and relatedness are met; expectancy-value theory; achievement goal theory; self-efficacy; and Weiner's attribution theory. Dweck's growth-versus-fixed mindset is influential but its measured effects on achievement are small. Motivation strongly influences academic achievement and test-score validity, since disengaged examinees, especially on low-stakes tests, produce scores that understate true ability.

1. What motivation theory is

Motivation is what initiates, directs, and sustains goal-directed behaviour — the answer to "why did they do that, and why did they keep going?" *Motivation theory* is the family of frameworks psychologists have built to explain that energy: what arouses a person to act, what steers the action toward one goal rather than another, and what keeps it up in the face of difficulty. There is no single theory of motivation; there is a set of complementary ones, each illuminating a different part of the picture.

The most basic distinction runs through all of them. *Intrinsic* motivation is doing something for its own sake — out of interest, curiosity, or the satisfaction of the activity itself. *Extrinsic* motivation is doing it for a separable outcome — a grade, a reward, approval, or to avoid a penalty. The two are not simply better and worse; both drive real behaviour, and much of modern motivation theory is about how they interact and how external incentives can either support or undermine intrinsic interest.

2. Early theories: needs and drives

The first wave of motivation theory asked what *energises* behaviour, and answered in terms of needs and drives. Drive-reduction theory held that physiological needs create tension (a drive) that behaviour acts to reduce, returning the organism to balance. Abraham Maslow's *hierarchy of needs* arranged human motives in ascending tiers — physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation — proposing that lower needs generally take priority until satisfied (Maslow, 1943).

These early models were enormously influential and remain widely taught, but they have real limits: the strict ordering of Maslow's hierarchy is not well supported empirically, and

drive-reduction struggles to explain why people seek out stimulation, challenge, and novelty even when no deficit is being reduced. Those puzzles — why a sated, safe person still works hard at a hard problem — pushed the field toward theories built around cognition and the self.

3. Modern theories of motivation

Contemporary motivation research is organised around several major theories, each capturing a distinct mechanism (Figure 2). *Self-determination theory* (Deci & Ryan) holds that intrinsic motivation flourishes when three basic psychological needs are met — autonomy, competence, and relatedness — and maps a continuum from controlled to self-determined regulation (Figure 1; Deci & Ryan, 2000). *Expectancy-value theory* proposes that motivation rises with both the *expectancy* of success and the *value* placed on the task — if either is near zero, effort collapses (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Achievement goal theory distinguishes *mastery* goals (improving competence) from *performance* goals (demonstrating ability relative to others), which shape how learners respond to difficulty. *Self-efficacy* theory centres on a person's belief in their capability to succeed, which predicts the goals they set and their persistence. And *attribution theory* examines how the explanations people give for success and failure — stable or unstable, within or outside their control — feed back into future motivation (Weiner, 1985). These theories are complementary lenses, not rivals.

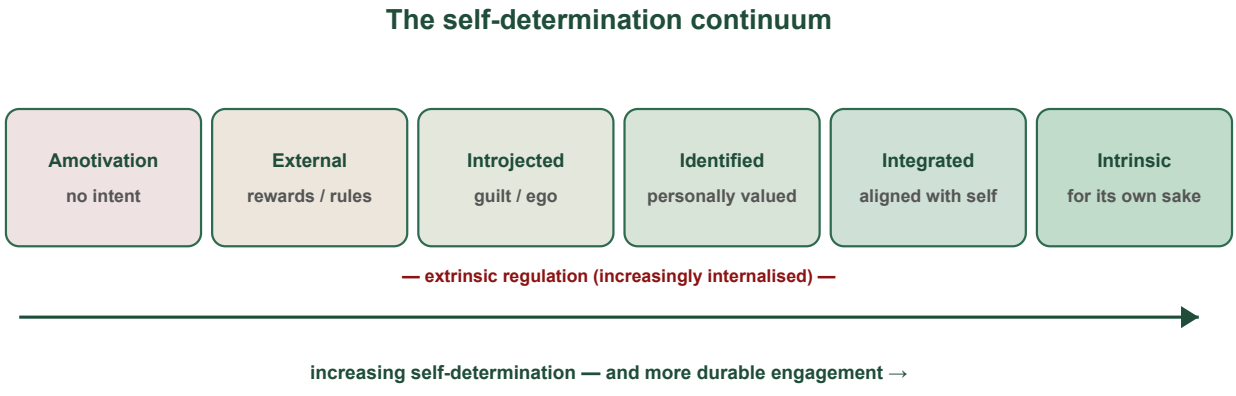

Figure 1. The self-determination continuum. From amotivation, through increasingly internalised forms of extrinsic regulation (external → introjected → identified → integrated), to fully intrinsic motivation. Self-determination — and durable engagement — rises from left to right (Deci & Ryan).

Major motivation theories at a glance

Maslow's hierarchy	needs ranked: physiological → self-actualisation
Drive-reduction	behaviour reduces the tension of unmet needs
Self-determination (SDT)	autonomy + competence + relatedness → intrinsic
Expectancy-value	motivation ≈ expectancy of success × task value
Achievement goals	mastery (improve) vs performance (outperform)
Self-efficacy	belief in one's capability drives persistence
Attribution	how we explain success/failure shapes next effort

Complementary lenses — each answers a different part of "why people act".

Figure 2. Major motivation theories at a glance. Each framework answers a different question — what energises behaviour, what direction it takes, and what sustains it. They are best used together rather than as competitors.

4. Mindset and the evidence

One motivation idea has escaped academia into popular culture: Carol Dweck's distinction between a *fixed* mindset (ability is innate and unchangeable) and a *growth* mindset (ability can develop through effort), the latter said to foster resilience and achievement. The intuition is appealing and the concept connects naturally to attribution and self-efficacy. But the evidence calls for care: a large meta-analysis found that the association between mindset and academic achievement is, on average, *weak*, and that mindset interventions produce only *small* effects — somewhat larger for academically at-risk and low-income students, but far from the transformative results sometimes claimed (Sisk et al., 2018).

The honest reading is that growth mindset captures something real — beliefs about the malleability of ability do matter, especially for vulnerable learners — without being a cure-all. It is a useful illustration of a wider lesson in motivation research: compelling ideas need rigorous testing, and effect sizes matter as much as the story. Motivation is genuinely important, but no single lever moves it dramatically for everyone.

5. Why motivation matters for learning and assessment

Motivation is one of the strongest proximal influences on academic achievement: engaged, self-determined learners attempt more, persist longer, and learn more deeply, which is why educational psychology treats it as a central design variable rather than a personality footnote. Teaching that supports autonomy, builds competence, and makes tasks feel worthwhile tends to produce more durable learning than reward-and-punishment alone.

Motivation also matters directly for *measurement*. A test score reflects not just ability but the effort a person brings, so when examinees are disengaged — as can happen on low-stakes assessments — scores understate true ability and the measurement is compromised. Valid assessment therefore depends on motivated test-takers, which is one reason well-designed instruments aim to be engaging and are administered in conditions that elicit genuine effort. Understanding motivation, in short, is part of both teaching well and measuring accurately.

Frequently asked questions

What is motivation theory?

Motivation theory is the family of psychological frameworks that explain motivation — the processes that initiate, direct, and sustain goal-directed behaviour. There is no single theory but a set of complementary ones, each illuminating a different part of why people act, choose one goal over another, and persist. They are unified by the basic distinction between intrinsic motivation (acting for the activity's own sake) and extrinsic motivation (acting for a separable outcome such as a reward or grade).

What is the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation?

Intrinsic motivation is doing something for its own sake — out of interest, curiosity, or the satisfaction of the activity itself. Extrinsic motivation is doing it for a separable outcome, such as a grade, reward, approval, or to avoid a penalty. Both drive real behaviour, and they are not simply better and worse; much of modern motivation theory concerns how they interact and how external incentives can either support or, in some conditions, undermine intrinsic interest.

What are the main theories of motivation?

Early theories explained motivation through needs and drives: drive-reduction theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Modern theories capture distinct mechanisms: self-determination theory (intrinsic motivation needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness), expectancy-value theory (motivation = expectancy of success × value of the task), achievement goal theory (mastery vs performance goals), self-efficacy theory (belief in one's capability), and attribution theory (how explanations for success and failure shape future motivation). They are complementary lenses rather than competitors.

Does a growth mindset improve achievement?

Modestly, not dramatically. Carol Dweck's distinction between a fixed mindset (ability is unchangeable) and a growth mindset (ability can develop with effort) is influential, but a large meta-analysis (Sisk et al., 2018) found the average association between mindset and academic achievement is weak, and mindset interventions produce only small effects — somewhat larger for academically at-risk and low-income students. Beliefs about the malleability of ability do matter, especially for vulnerable learners, but growth mindset is not a cure-all.

Why does motivation matter for testing?

Because a test score reflects not just ability but the effort a person brings. When examinees are disengaged — as can happen on low-stakes assessments — scores understate true ability and the measurement is compromised. Valid assessment therefore depends on motivated test-takers, which is one reason well-designed instruments aim to be engaging and are administered under conditions that elicit genuine effort. Motivation is part of both teaching well and measuring accurately.

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AT A GLANCE

What it is	Frameworks for why people act and persist
Key distinction	Intrinsic (for its own sake) vs extrinsic (for an outcome)
Early theories	Drive-reduction · Maslow's hierarchy
Modern theories	SDT · expectancy-value · achievement goals · self-efficacy · attribution
Mindset	Real but small effects (Sisk et al., 2018)
For assessment	Disengaged test-takers → scores understate ability

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